

**“WHY THEN THE LAW?”**

In this last section of chapter 3, Paul is continuing to answer the question that he raised all the way back in verse 2 of this chapter: “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” In the preceding paragraphs, Paul spoke of the promise that God had given to Abraham and of how this promise was received by faith, not by works of the law. Now in this section, as he continues to anticipate the objections that the Judaizers might raise in response to the things he is writing, he explains how the giving of the law relates to the giving of the promise. As we look at this passage tonight, I want to explain the three main points that are made by Paul in these verses: *first, the law does not nullify the promise; second, the law was given in order to reveal our need for a Savior; and third, now that Christ has come, the period of the law’s guardianship is over.*

We begin then with the first point: *the law does not nullify the promise.* Paul begins this paragraph by giving what he calls “a human example,” an example from everyday life. He talks about man-made covenants, by which he is probably referring to testaments or wills. Once a will has been finally ratified or put into effect, it cannot be altered. Now, it is true that in our culture a will can be modified after it has been made. The same was true in Roman culture, though in Greek culture a will could not be changed after it had been made. But the important point is this: with every will there comes a point, regardless of the laws of the particular society in which the will is made, when it is settled once and for all. For us, that point comes when the person who made the will dies and

the will passes through probate. Death, followed by probate, serves as the ratification of the will. After that point, nothing can be done to change its terms.

Paul uses this example in order to make an argument from the lesser to the greater. This is what he is saying: if a human will cannot be added to or annulled after it has been ratified, then neither can the promises that God made to Abraham be altered or added to after he gave them. And God's promises to Abraham were like a will in the sense that they were freely given. Abraham did not do anything to merit what God had promised him. It was a royal grant from God.

In verse 16, Paul uses a point of grammar to make an important biblical theological point. He notes that in the book of Genesis, when God made his covenant with Abraham, God said that this covenant would be with Abraham and his offspring. The point that Paul picks up on here is that the term "offspring" is singular, not plural. Now, of course, Paul knew that the word offspring could be used in a collective sense. He even uses it that way himself in verse 29. But he wants us to see that the promises that were made to Abraham and to his collective offspring, which includes those of us who trust in Christ, were ultimately made with the one true offspring of Abraham. God's covenant promises are mediated through Jesus Christ. As the one true offspring of Abraham, the head of God's redeemed humanity, Jesus is the true party, on the human side, to the covenant that God made with Abraham. This is why Hebrews 2:13 has Jesus saying these words from the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, I and the children God has given me." Jesus is the true offspring of Abraham, and we become Abraham's offspring by being united to Christ.

The reason why Paul makes this point is because he wants us to see that the promises that were made to Abraham awaited their true fulfillment in Christ. The law came 430 years after the promise, but Christ did not come for another 1500 years after the giving of the law. At the time the law was given, the promises were still awaiting their fulfillment. And remember, these were God-given promises, promises that were certain to be fulfilled because God cannot lie. The law could not make the promise void because the promise was for something that was still to come.

In verse 18, Paul sums up his point about why the law does not nullify the promise by emphasizing the fact that promise and law are antithetical to each other. The inheritance cannot come to God's people by both the law and the promise. A promise is what God says he will do. Laws are what God tells us to do. A promise can only be kept by the person who makes it. We cannot do anything to obtain it. We can only trust that God will do what he has said he will do. That is what Abraham did, and he was counted as righteous. This is why Paul says that God "gave" the inheritance to Abraham. Salvation was a free gift for Abraham, and it is a free gift for us as well.

This brings us to the second point that is made in this text: *the law was given in order to reveal our need for a Savior*. Once again, Paul anticipates an objection that the Judaizers might raise in response to what he is saying. If the law did not alter the promise that God made to Abraham, then why was the law given at all? Is Paul saying that the law is opposed to God's plan of salvation? Certainly not! Instead, Paul says that the law was given "because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom

the promise had been made.” The law was given in order to expose our guilt. Paul says the same thing in Romans 3:20, where he writes, “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The law of God was not given in order that it might be a means of salvation, but in order that it might show us our need for a Savior. The law shows us the desperation of our condition. And we need to see that desperation if we are ever going to have a true and living faith in Jesus Christ. As John Calvin puts it,

“For we will never have enough confidence in [Christ] unless we become deeply distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.” [*Institutes* 3.12.8]

The law was given in order bring about the desolation of which Calvin speaks. It was given to expose our need. As we saw in the previous section of Galatians, our failure to perfectly keep the law places us under the curse of the law. And it is in this sense that it imprisoned everything under sin until Christ came.

Paul continues to contrast the law with the promise by pointing out that the law was given through mediators, while the promise was given directly. God gave the law through Moses, and even in giving the law to Moses God worked through the mediation of angels, as we learn from several other biblical texts. [see Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:17; Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2] The very fact that the law required mediation when it was given shows

us how it differed from the promise. The law itself is good. But because we break the law every day we are condemned as lawbreakers.

This brings us to the third main point that Paul makes in our text: *now that Christ has come, the period of the law's guardianship is over.* Paul uses two more illustrations from everyday life in verses 23-24. The first is that of a jailer holding someone captive, an image that is easy for people in any culture to understand. The second illustration, however, requires a little bit of explaining. When Paul likens the law to a guardian, he is referring to a common practice in the Greco-Roman world, a practice in which a slave was employed by the wealthy to have charge over their children until they came of age. This slave would serve as a sort of chaperone. He would be responsible for meting out discipline and making sure that the child went to school. The child was entirely under his care. But once the child came of age, around the age of 16, he would no longer be under the charge of this guardian.

Paul is saying that the law, in the historical outworking of God's plan of salvation, functioned like a jailer and a guardian. It served as a guardian for the Jewish people until the gospel was fully revealed. But now that Christ has come, the law no longer serves this purpose. God's people are no longer like an underage child under the charge of a guardian. We are of age. We are "sons of God" through faith in Jesus Christ.

There are two things I want to clarify about what Paul says in this last paragraph of chapter 3. First, when he speaks of the Old Testament era as the time "before faith came," he is not saying that salvation was not by faith during the time before Christ

came. As Paul has made clear throughout this book, Abraham was saved by the same faith that saves us. Salvation has always been by faith. However, in terms of the outworking of God's plan of redemption within history, faith did not come in its fullness until Christ came. Paul is speaking here of the mature faith that is now possible in response to the fullness of the revelation of Christ in time.

The second thing to clarify is that the title "sons of God" (which obviously includes both men and women, as verse 28 makes perfectly clear) is a title that is reserved for those who have faith in Jesus Christ. While God is the creator of all people, he is not the Father of all people. We can only become sons and daughters of God by virtue of our union with the unique Son of God by faith. This is the doctrine of adoption, which our Westminster Confession of Faith defines in these terms:

"All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have His name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry, Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation." [WCF 12.1]

This blessing of adoption is one of the things that is signified and sealed in the sacrament of baptism. Those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Those who possess the reality that baptism represents, a true union with Christ by faith, really are connected to Christ and to all of the things that he has secured for us by his life, death and resurrection. He is the true offspring of Abraham, the true party in the covenant that God made with Abraham. And if we are united to him by faith, then we are Abraham's offspring as well. And this makes us heirs of the promises that God gave to Abraham.

Paul will have more to say about the law in the last two chapters of Galatians. The law still has a role to play in the lives of Abraham's offspring, the heirs of the promise. While we have been set free from the law's function as our prison guard and guardian, we are not to use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Paul was not an antinomian. But in his letter to the Galatians he was responding to the opposite error, the error of legalism. He had to show that the law is not a means of salvation. This does not mean, however, that the law is opposed to God's plan of salvation. In fact, the law plays a vital role in salvation, because it exposes our need for a Savior. And this is a prerequisite for biblical faith. As J. Gresham Machen once wrote,

“It is not enough for us to know that Jesus is great and good; it is not enough for us to know that He was instrumental in the creation of the world and that He is now seated on the throne of all being. These things are indeed necessary to faith,

but they are not all that is necessary; if we are to trust Jesus, we must come to Him personally and individually with some need of the soul which He alone can relieve.” [*What Is Faith?*, 118-19]

The law of God exposes the need of our souls because it exposes our sin. The law brings us to a point of despair over any possibility of saving ourselves. Were it not for the law, we might have thought that our own supposed righteousness was sufficient to save us. But the high standard of God’s law shows us how far we fall short of what he requires of us. And this, says Machen, is the only way to truly come to Christ – “first penitence at the dread voice of the law, then joy at the gracious invitation of the Saviour.” [121]

When we come to Christ and his cross in this way, the burden of the guilt of sin, which no human hand could ever remove, will fall from our backs and we will live in the glorious freedom of the sons of God forevermore.